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ABSTRACT

This study assesses the impact of selected variables on the legal knowledge of 136 secondary school principals in the state of West Virginia. The variables selected for study include: (1) training; (2) teaching; (3) experience; (4) administrative experience; and (5) school district size. Analysis revealed that selected variables in this study had little or no impact on the legal knowledge of secondary school principals. The author recommends that secondary school principals be more familiar with practical approaches taken by his/her state's laws in relevant areas. A questionnaire was mailed to each of the 136 secondary school principals with two follow-up mailings yielding an 88 percent response rate. (Author/EH)

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Legal Knowledge of Secondary School Principals: Impact of Selected Variables

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of selected variables on the legal knowledge of secondary school principals (n=136) in the state of West Virginia. Internal consistency coefficient alpha of the instrument was .7182. The selected variables in the study were: training, teaching, experience, administrative experience, and school district size. Chi-square analyses revealed that selected variables in this study had little or no impact on the legal knowledge of secondary school principals. It was recommended that the secondary school principal needs to be more familiar with practical approaches taken by his or her state's laws in relevant areas.

Legal Knowledge of Secondary School principals: Impact of Selected Variables

Today, the nature of the principal's job is fundamentally different as a result of this tide of litigation (Doverspike, 1990). In addition to its traditional components (mentor, instructional leaders, chief disciplinarian, site manager, and decision maker), the principal function has taken on new overtones: the principal of the 1990's and 21st century must now be, to a degree undreamed of even twenty-five years ago, a legal expert. Principals who attempt to manage schools in the 1990's and the 21st century without a working knowledge of education related law are operating under unrealistic assumptions, and may also be needlessly exposing themselves to liability from a variety of sources (Doverspike, 1990).

A study by Magnus (1992) showed that principals with five or fewer years of teaching made decisions significantly more compatible with existing law and used shorter decision-making process than principals with more years of teaching. According to Clark (1990), a significant difference was found between those educators who had a course in school law and those educators who had not taken a course in school law, thus supporting the idea that such education will enhance knowledge.

Several studies (Bagnato, 1990; Caldwell, 1986; Clark, 1990; Osborn, 1990; Nawnne, 1986) have shown that there is no relationship between principals' knowledge of school law and their preparation (kind and quantity) or years of administrative experience. In addition, Shaw (1983) reported that no relationship was found between knowledge of school law and the amount of legal training that principals received.

Bagnato (1990) and Nawnne (1986) indicate that school district size of secondary principals was not related significantly to their knowledge or ability to apply the law. However, size of the school district and role of the administrator were related significantly to the importance

administrators assigned to select information sources.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of selected variables on the legal knowledge of secondary public school principals in the state of West Virginia. The research questions were as follows:

1. Are secondary school principals knowledgeable about legal concepts?
2. What is the association between the legal knowledge of secondary school principals and their training?
3. What is the association between the legal knowledge of secondary school principals and their teaching experience?
4. What is the association between the legal knowledge of secondary school principals and their administrative experience?
5. What is the association between the legal knowledge of secondary school principals and school district size?

Definition of Terms

The following definition of terms are applicable to this study:

Mid-Size City - Central city of a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) with the city having a population less than 6,000 people per square mile.

Urban Fringe of Mid-Size City - Place within a SMSA of a mid-size central city and defined as urban by the Census Bureau.

Large Town - Town within a SMSA, with a population greater than or equal to 25,000.

Small Town - Town not within a SMSA and with a population less than 25,000 and greater than or

equal to 2,500 people.

Rural - A place with less than 2,5000 people or a place having a zip code designated rural by the Census Bureau.

Research Methodology

Population and Sample

The population (N=210) was all secondary public school principals listed in the 1995-1996 West Virginia Public School Directory. The sample size (n=136) was calculated based upon a formula presented by Tuckman (1978, p. 231-232). The formula derived the sample size based upon an anticipated five percent margin of sampling error, and 95 percent confidence interval.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire, Legal Knowledge Index, was developed with the assistance of expert review and then piloted to establish its validity and reliability. Internal Consistency Coefficient alpha (Cronbach) of the instrument was .7182. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of items requesting demographic information. The second part was a 40-item instrument developed for assessing knowledge of West Virginia school law. Construct validity was evaluated by administering the instrument to twelve graduate students and six secondary school principals enrolled in a school law seminar. These participants were not included as part of the sample for the study.

Data Collection

The questionnaire, along with a cover letter and a self-addressed envelope, were mailed to each of the 136 secondary school principals during the spring semester of the academic year 1995-96. To ensure a high return rate, the Total Design Method (Dillman, 1978) was utilized. The initial mailing and two follow-up mailings yielded an 88.23% (120) response rate.

A non-response bias procedure, the early/late response approach as described by Miller and Smith (1983), was used to determine non-response bias in response to each question. Since no significant differences were found between early respondents and late respondents, the data received were assumed to representative to the sample/population (Miller and Smith, 1983).

Analysis of Data

The data were analyzed using SPSS/PC+. Chi-square analyses and descriptive statistics were used to describe the data.

Results and Conclusions

Legal Knowledge of Secondary School Principals

Principals' mean score on the legal knowledge index was 29.19 (SD=3.65). Raw scores were based on a maximum possible score of 40. This finding suggests that respondents in this study had an average preparation in school law. Overall, respondents mastered only 73.40% the material. This finding is also consistent with the opinions and findings of Donvanis and Brown (1995).

The top ten legal knowledge questions which respondents were least likely to answer correctly were in the following components of school law: sex discrimination against teachers, compulsory schooling and parents' rights, child abuse and neglect, freedom of expression, due process for teachers, express and implied contracts, mandatory community service, and racial discrimination against teachers and staff.

Table 1 displays the top ten legal knowledge questions which respondents were least likely to answer correctly. Ranked at the top was the question, "can gender be a relevant factor in selection of a school counselor?" (frequency = 102). Ranked second was the question, if parents have religious objections, "can they avoid sending their children to school?" (frequency=89). Ranked

third was the question, "is it important to be able to distinguish between abuse and neglect?" (frequency = 87). Only 35% (42) of the respondents were knowledgeable about the following question: "can school refuse to rehire probationary teachers for any reason?" Ironically this case occurred in the state of West Virginia (Miller v. Board of Education, 1978).

Insert Table 1 about here

These findings suggest a need for the state of West Virginia to develop inservice programs to update principals' current legal knowledge. The very nature of the law dictates that practicing principals be up-to-date with current changes and other developments. Respondents in this study were also less likely to answer questions correctly in the "freedom of expression" component. This is consistent with the findings of Clark (1990).

Association Between Legal Knowledge and Selected Variables

The selected variables in this study were: training (kind/quantity), teaching experience, administrative experience, and school communities as defined by the Census Bureau. The data revealed that there was a low degree of association between legal knowledge of secondary school principals and selected variables. Chi-square analyses were statistically not significant ($p>.05$). Thus, selected variables in this study had little or not impact on the legal knowledge of secondary school principals (see tables 2,3,4). These results are consistent with the opinions and findings of several researchers (Bagnato, 1990; Caldwell, 1986; Clark, 1990; Osborn, 1990; Nwanne, 1986; and Shaw, 1983).

Insert Tables 2, 3, and 4 about here

Educational Significance

The secondary school principal must keep in mind that some areas of the law affecting his or her role are state-based and may as a result vary significantly. The secondary school principal needs to be familiar with practical approaches taken by his or her state's laws in relevant areas. Further research needs to be done in those areas which are state-based. One possible outgrowth of this study is an inservice program which could be designed for principals and teachers. Such a program should address the selected school law components discussed in this study.

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Table 1
Top Ten Legal Knowledge Questions Which Respondents Were Least Likely to Answer Correctly (n = 120)

Rank	Question	Frequency	Percentage
1	Can gender be a relevant factor in selection of a school counselor?	102	85
2	If parents have religious objections to school, can they avoid sending their children to school?	89	74.14
3	Is it important to be able to distinguish between abuse and neglect?	87	72.50
4	Are personal complaints protected by the First Amendment?	86	71.66
5	Can school refuse to rehire probationary teachers for any reason?	78	65
6	Can a school board ever restrict teachers' rights to publicize their views?	76	63.33
7	Does a contract have to be in writing?	63	52.50
8	Can public schools require students to participate in community service?	60	50
9	Is a publication obscene if it contains offensive, vulgar, or "dirty" language?	59	49.16
10	Can minorities be dismissed when reduction occur as a result of desegregation?	57	47.50

Note. Percents do not total 100 because of multiple responses.

Table 2

Crosstabulations of Legal Knowledge of Secondary School Principals by Teaching Experience (n = 120)

	Teaching Experience					
	Less than 10 yrs		More than 10 yrs		Total	
Raw Score [a]	n	% [b]	n	% [b]	n	% [b]
16-21	3	2.5	1	.8	4	3.4
22-27	14	11.7	14	11.7	28	23.4
25-33	32	26.7	45	37.5	77	64.1
34-35	8	6.6	3	2.5	11	9.1
Total	57	47.5	63	52.5	120	100

Note. [a] Raw scores based on a maximum of 40.

[b] Percent of total sample.

Cramer's V = .20.

Table 3

Crosstabulations of Legal Knowledge of Secondary School Principals by Administrative Experience (n = 120)

	Administrative Experience					
	Less than 10 yrs.		More than 10 yrs.		Total	
Raw Score[a]	n	%[b]	n	%[b]	n	%[b]
16-21	1	.8	3	2.5	4	3.3
22-27	9	7.5	19	15.8	28	23.3
28-33	20	16.7	57	47.5	77	64.2
34-35	2	1.7	9	7.5	11	9.2
Total	32	26.7	88	73.3	120	100

Note. [a] Raw scores based on a maximum of 40.

[b] Percent of total sample.

Cramer's V = .08.

Table 4

Crosstabulations of Legal Knowledge of Secondary School Principals by Selected School Communities (n = 120)

	Location											
	Mid-Size City		Urban Fringe Mid-Size City		Large Town		Small Town		Rural		Total	
Raw Score[a]	n	%[b]	n	%[b]	n	%[b]	n	%[b]	n	%[b]	n	%[b]
16-21	1	.8	0	0	0	0	1	.8	2	1.7	4	3.3
22-27	2	1.7	2	1.7	1	.8	8	6.7	15	12.5	28	23.3
28-33	6	5.0	8	6.7	2	1.7	24	20.0	37	30.8	77	64.2
34-35	0	0	1	.8	2	1.7	3	2.5	5	4.2	11	9.2
Total	9	7.5	11	9.2	5	4.2	36	30	59	49.2	120	100

Note. [a] Raw scores based on a maximum of 40.

[b] Percent of total sample.

Cramer's V = .15.